DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 274 084 EA 018 848

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TITLE	Community Involvement Pays Off.
INSTITUTION	National School Boards Association, Alexandria, VA. Educational Policies Service.
PUB DATE	Oct 86
NOTE	5p.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT	Updating School Board Policies; v17 n9 p1-3 Oct 1986
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Board of Education Policy; Bond Issues; College School Cooperation; *Community Involvement; Declining Enrollment; *Educational Change; Educational Facilities Planning; Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; *Master Plans; School Budget Elections; School Closing
IDENTIFIERS	Excellence in Education; *Scottsdale Unified School District AZ

ABSTRACT

After closing a high school in 1983, the Scottsdale, Arizona, Unified School District needed to regain community confidence and support. Assisted by the dean of the Arizona State University College of Education, the school board agreed on four goals: (1) an instructional program that ensures all students will master competencies required for successful life; (2) a system of recognition and reward that acknowledges excellence in performance by employees; (3) a long-range plan for resource utilization; and (4) a system that ensures effective participation by citizens and staff in evaluation and planning. As the next step, the board employed a facilitator to work with the community to conduct a complete review of the school system program within the framework of the four goals. The result was a report, "Citizens for Effective Schools," that addressed 96 issues and included approximately 200 recommendations. One of these recommendations resulted in the adoption of a facility and/or boundary change policy. A 60-member citizen committee was established to help create a 5- to 10-year facility master plan. Citizens organized to get voters to approve a bond to construct annd renovate school facilities and a budget override that, among other things, raised teachers' salaries. The board's actions raised the confidence of the community. Of the parents surveyed, 72 percent gave the school system a rating of "good" or "outstanding." (MLF)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 17/Number 9/October 1986

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How good are the odds that voters will approve $49.5 million in bond moneys to construct new facilities and renovate old ones for a declining enrollment school system? To authorize a $4.9 million budget override to increase teacher salaries by nine percent and authorize the hiring of additional staff? To vote approval to lease 40 acres of school property on which sat a closed high school—a school that practically no one wanted shut down?

The odds on winning a favorable response to even one of these questions probably are not very good. In a community where approximately 60 percent of the taxpayers no longer have children in the schools, the odds probably are a lot poorer.

The Scottsdale (Ariz.) Unified School District beat the odds during the 1985-86 school year when voters authorized all of these items.

Setting the scene

The Scottsdale Unified School District is considered a premiere school system. Eighty percent of its graduates continue their education after high school. Standardized test scores at all levels are among the highest in the state—and Arizona scores are above the national average. A study conducted in 1986 by Western Savings, an Arizona bank that studies and forecasts statewide conditions, found that 72 percent of Scottsdale's public school parents rate their schools as either "good" or "outstanding"—the highest ranking given to any school system in the report.

Dr. Philip E. Gates served as an administrator in the Scottsdale Unified School District for 14 years, most recently as superintendent for four years. Cheryn Wall is Scottsdale's director of community relations.

Even the finest of educational systems are not without problems, however. Just a few years ago, several coinciding events led to an erosion of community confidence in the Scottsdale school system. Enrollment had peaked at 29,000 students in the early 1970s, but dropped to 19,000 students in a decade. As a result, half a dozen elementary schools were closed in the late '70s and a high school was closed in 1983. To make matters worse, Scottsdale schools, like most other public school systems across the country, were reeling from the avalanche of criticism emanating as a result of *A Nation at Risk*, which was released in the spring of 1983.

Loss of public confidence

The high school closure in 1983 was a particularly difficult decision for the community to accept.

In November 1982, the administration recommended to the school board that Arcadia High School, one of five secondary schools, be closed due to declining enrollment. As an alternative, the administration recommended closing Scottsdale High School, which had been in existence for 61 years.

For three months, the board debated the high school closure issue in public meetings. Board meetings were held in school auditoriums because of the large number of people who came to protest or support one or the other of the administration's recommendations.

Finally, in January 1983, the board voted (3-2) to close Scottsdale High School.

The entire community was stunned, then angry. People questioned the board's decision. They asked why the administration had not adequately prepared the community for the decision. Even the Arcadia community, which had escaped unscathed, was angry that it had been put in the position of arguing for closing a sister school to keep its own school open. The credibility of the central office administration and the school board fell to zero.

The extent of the lack of public confidence in the school system was reflected in the Western Savings' *Forecast '84* which reported that the level of citizen satisfaction with city services ranked Scottsdale second to the lowest in the Phoenix metropolitan area. It was reported that this could be attributed to disenchantment with the public schools resulting from the high school closure.

Clearly, the school system had a serious problem: how to regain community confidence in and support for its schools.

Proactive effort

Given the preceding scenario, the voter approval won last year shows a remarkable turnaround. How did it happen?

Rather than turning and running, the school board and administration took a proactive position. Just prior to *A Nation at Risk* being released, the board and the top two administrators requested the assistance of the dean of the Arizona State University College of Education in establishing school system goals.

Previous attempts had been unsuccessful; no school board had been able to reach consensus on its goals. This time was different, however, largely because of the facilitating skills of the dean and his assistant.

In the spring of 1983, following a series of three dialogues, the board agreed on four goals:

- an instructional program based on an expectation of excellence which ensures that all students will mas-

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ter competencies required for successful life;
- a system of recognition and reward that acknowledges excellence in performance by employees;
- a long-range plan for resource utilization;
- a system that ensures effective participation by citizens and staff in evaluation and planning.

Citizen involvement

As the next step, the school system employed a paid facilitator to work with patrons in the community (students, parents, staff, nonparents) who volunteered to conduct a complete review of the school system program within the framework of each of the board's four goals. To ensure objectivity, the facilitator was given complete charge of this community activity.

The facilitator convened a community meeting in the fall of 1983 to describe the evaluation project. Approximately 400 patrons attended that first meeting, and many of them signed up to participate in the study; about 150 citizens actually stayed with the process for the six-month duration of the study.

This citizen effort gained much credibility from the appointment of the president of the Scottsdale Community College as chairman of the 12-member steering committee. Under the steering committee's leadership, six citizen committees were established to evaluate the school system in four areas:
- instructional excellence;
- resource management;
- increasing resources;
- community involvement.

The result was the report *Citizens for Effective Schools* (CES) that addressed 96 issues. For some of the issues, there were only one or two recommendations; for others, there were several. In all, the report included approximately 200 recommendations.

Implementation

In the summer of 1984, the school board officially received the CES report and instructed the central administration to analyze it and recommend appropriate steps. During the course of the next 12 months, each CES recommendation was assigned to an administrator who assumed responsibility for its consideration by the superintendent. A written format for tracking each recommendation was established.

The central level cabinet, consisting of the school system's top administrators, coordinated the review. To reassure citizens that there was active follow-up for each CES recommendation during the 1984-85 school year, quarterly written reports were sent to all CES participants.

The fourth and final quarterly report was presented to the CES steering committee at a regularly scheduled board meeting in the spring of 1985. The document contained a status report on each of the 200 recommendations.

The citizens as well as the board could see movement in many of the areas of concern. For example, as a result of the CES report, the administration recommended to the board:
- the increase from 20 to 22 units for graduation;
- reduced class sizes in the elementary schools;
- separation of the elementary schools (K-6) and middle schools (7-8);
- construction of one or more new schools in the growing portions of the school community;
- establishment of an Office for Educational Partnerships;
- establishment of a board policy regarding involvement of citizens more fully in future school closure or boundary change issues.

School closing policy

The latter recommendation was included in the CES report because of citizens' bitter feelings resulting from their perception of the administration's handling of the high school closure. They felt that the recommendation to close the school had been "dropped" on the community with little advance warning.

Consequently, a policy, "Facility Consolidation, Closing, and/or Boundary Changes," was recommended by the CES for adoption by the board. With only slight modification, this three-page policy was recommended by staff to the board and was adopted in the winter of 1985.

The policy establishes strict guidelines regarding how the administration will proceed should it ever want to make adjustments in student attendance areas with respect to boundary changes, consolidation, or closure. For example, the policy calls for meetings of people from target schools to review the rationale for boundary adjustments in their attendance areas. It requires posting of notices of these meetings in area newspapers. It also requires at least two public hearings prior to the administration taking any specific recommendations relative to boundary changes to the board.

Policy in action

During the spring of 1985, a 60-member citizens committee chaired by the superintendent was established to help create a five-to-ten year facility master plan. The committee members represented all schools as well as parents and staff living in a 30-square-mile area in which rapid growth was underway but where no school was located.

All meetings were held in public and were attended by the press. Eight evening meetings were held to hammer out a short- and long-range Facility Master Plan. During the course of these sessions, demographic information was provided, differences in educational philosophy and values were debated, and a series of forced-choice exercises were conducted to help this large committee reach consensus on the issues.

By the last session, seven different master plans were under consideration. After much debate—using rules of parliamentary procedure, one of the plans was approved by a 32-19 vote.

Citizens had been meaningfully involved in school system decision making. Indeed, the decision-making process was as important as the product.

Updating School Board Policies is published eleven times annually and provided to every board member and the policy administrator of school districts that are members of the National School Boards Association's Direct Affiliate Program or subscribers to NSBA's Educational Policies Service. EPS Staff: Dale Gaddy, director, education and management services department; Brenda Z. Greene, editor; Carol MacDougall, editorial assistant; Eve Shepard, clearinghouse manager.

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Benefits

As a result of their substantial involvement in creating the Facility Master Plan, citizens organized to get voters to approve authorization to lease the vacant Scottsdale High school property (worth $800 million over 99 years). An election campaign committee, with one of the parent members of the master plan committee as chairman, was able to persuade enough people to vote in favor of the authorization to see it pass by a two-to-one margin in the fall of 1985.

After five community hearings on the proposed Facility Master Plan, the citizen committee's plan was forwarded to the school board in December 1985. The board discussed the plan for three hours before approving it unanimously.

On that same evening, the board also approved going to the voters to request consideration of a $49.5 million bond to construct and renovate school facilities and a $4.9 million budget override. The override was to pay for increasing teacher salaries, hiring additional teachers necessary for implementing the increase in graduation requirements, reducing class sizes in the elementary schools, hiring teacher coaches, and purchasing computer hardware and software.

Because of their active involvement in the Citizens for Effective Schools and Facility Master Plan projects, there was a high level of commitment on the part of citizens to campaign for the successful passage of the bond and override elections during the winter of 1986. Teachers joined with parents in preparing literature for the campaign, presenting information to interested publics, and making telephone calls.

In February 1986, the patrons approved both the bond and the override. That was indeed cause for celebration.

As a result of the passage of these issues, several important activities currently are being implemented throughout the school system:

- one K-6 modular-constructed school has been erected in time for the Fall 1986 opening of school;
- 1,200 teachers have received an average nine percent salary increase (the average teacher salary is $29,999);
- classroom enrollments have been reduced (e.g., developmental kindergarten and first grades, 18:1; regular kindergarten, 20:1; grades 1-3, 25:1; grades 4-6, 30:1; grades 7-12, 27:1);
- a half dozen master teachers have been assigned roles as full-time teacher coaches (to assist in implementing the Madeline Hunter Essential Elements of Instruction and Clinical Supervision programs);
- high school staffing has been provided for the two additional credits required for graduation;
- three million dollars worth of computer hardware and software is being purchased for educational purposes within the guidelines of a five-year implementation plan;
- negotiations have begun to hire a project manager to work with contractors in the development of the 40-acre high school site which will be leased over a 99-year period.

The frosting on the cake, so to speak, was the Western Savings' *Forecast '86* released in the spring of 1986. It reported that 72 percent of the Scottsdale School District parents surveyed gave the school system a rating of "good" or "outstanding." This was particularly satisfying because the *Forecast '84* report had shown school system administration and board credibility at a low point.

The Scottsdale School District now enjoys restored public confidence in its school system. Clearly, extensive community involvement has reaped handsome rewards for the schools—and most importantly, for the children. ■

Address community involvement in policy

The Scottsdale experience is a good example of how active community involvement can unify community, staff, and school board in achieving school system goals. Adopting policies that encourage community involvement in planning and decision making is the first step. To ensure that your school board is appropriately involving those who are affected by your decisions, take the time to review your policies on:

- Community Involvement in Decision Making, EPS Code ABA (Also KC);
- Staff Involvement in Decision Making, ABB (Also GBB);
- Student Involvement in Decision Making, ABC (Also JFB);
- Advisory Committees, BCF;
- Public Participation at Board Meetings, BDDH (Also KD);
- Board Hearings, BDE;
- Board Policy Development, BF;
- Public Information Program, KB;
- Public Complaints, KL;
- Relations with Community Organizations, KM.